

Pure, Old Fashioned Religion

James 1:17-27

August 30, 2009

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speech, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I almost hesitate to preach a sermon now, because we just got one from Brother James.

We don't hear James much in church. Many people shy away from James because he is just too preachy.

What – with all this...

“Bridle your tongue”

“Rid yourselves of all sordidness”

“Keep yourself unstained by the world”

kind of talk, it is almost as if we are stacked like cordwood in a revival tent on a hot and humid August evening.

You can see James up there, can't you? Sweating and holding his Bible; pounding the pulpit; working himself up to that *call for commitment*, where the sinners will come down to be born again.

James gets a bad rap because people think he just too preachy.

And not just people like you and me. The great Reformer Martin Luther thought it, too. Martin Luther called James “the epistle of straw.” He was frustrated by the letter's fixation on the need for good works to prove one's faith.¹ Luther thought James was not fit to be included in the Bible because its theology was flimsy; it was shallow; it was naïve.

Doers of the word. What kind of world does James think we live in, anyway? He certainly didn't have a clue as to how complicated our world is today. Here he is, giving us instructions on how to act:
be doers of the word: don't be angry;
be doers of the word: watch your mouth;
be doers of the word: don't forget who you see in the mirror;
be doers of the word: look after the orphans and widows.

This kind of old-time religion sounds downright quaint when compared to the problems we face, doesn't it? What we face seems to require more than us being “doers of the word.” What we face will take more than a religion full of do-gooders.

¹ Luther later revised his opinion of James, seeing that, indeed, it did fit in with Paul's theology of grace – where the work we do is a reflection of God's saving act in Jesus Christ.

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The truth is, we live in a complicated world.

We live in a world where 3 billion people (almost half the planet) live on less than \$2.50/day.

As if that wasn't complicated enough.

I haven't seen it yet, but there is a movie playing at the Robinson Film Center called *Food, Incorporated*. It is a documentary that describes the human consequences of huge, multi-national agribusiness maximizing profit at the expense of access to food for millions of people in the world and our own country.

We live in complicated world.

A world where violence is more normative than peace; where terrorists persist in their efforts to sow fear and unrest.

It is a world where a person's faith is perverted to give them permission to hate and to harm and to think of their neighbors as less than human.

We live in complicated world.

It is a world – part of which twenty of us saw this summer in Malawi, Africa – with no easy solutions. In the one, small, village of Dzuwa – where we stayed for most of a week – we came face to face with huge problems in the areas of public health, education, environmental awareness, and access to clean drinking water.

I don't know. It just seems that the problems we face are too big; they are too much.

In seminary, I learned that sin is more than just a few isolated bad decisions – more than personal morality – but that sin is systemic in nature. I learned that sin affects the very systems in which we live. Sin like this is not easily rooted out; not easily identified. It makes the world we live in complicated.

And here comes James. *Preaching*. Admonishing us to be *doers of the word*? For what? It seems naïve to me – to think that the way we live would matter in the face all that confronts our world.

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Answer me this: how old were you when you realized you could not save the world? When did it happen?

I was twenty-six when reality started to hit. I was in my last semester of seminary – full of prophetic fire and righteous ideas – and looking for a church as Lindsey prepared to take her turn in seminary in Richmond, Virginia.

One the churches I interviewed with was a tiny congregation in Goochland, Virginia – on the outskirts of Richmond in the country. The church was founded in 1748 with about 60 members. 255 years later, in 2003 it still had 60 members – not the same ones, mind you, but I am pretty sure they were related to the originals.

The church’s “motto” – what they put on the sign in the front lawn and on the bulletin – was “Holding Forth the Word of Truth.” Right out of James chapter 1.

When we came to visit the pastor nominating committee was very kind. They treated us well; took us out to dinner, and put us up at a bed and breakfast. They gave Lindsey a cookbook and a flower. It was sweet.

My interview with them did not go so well. It seemed they were not that interested in my prophetic fire and righteous ideas. One member of the committee got into a conversation/argument with me when I informed her that the gospel of Matthew was not actually written by the disciple named Matthew – and neither were the first five books of the Bible written by Moses (who, as I explained, actually dies in Deuteronomy before the book is finished). I don’t know why I brought that up in the interview. What can I say – I was much younger than the sage who stands before you now!

When the weekend was over, I was surprised I did not connect with the committee because I knew one member who served on it. He was someone who attended graduate school at UNC the same time I was there as an undergrad. We were both a part of the church in Chapel Hill. Flip was his name.

Flip was one of these guys who had about 18 degrees and two brains. He might have driven the first Toyota Prius ever built. It seemed there was nothing he didn't know – and you just kind of felt smarter standing close to him.

Flip was the person who contacted me about interviewing at this church. After the interview, I couldn't believe he attended there. They just seemed so quaint – too much so for someone of Flip's caliber. I didn't see what he got out of it; worshipping in this kind of church that didn't seem to notice the complexities of the world.

It turned out the committee extended me a call to become their pastor. I think I must have been their only candidate! I turned them down – realizing that I was not called to be the pastor of a small church. The hardest part of that process was for me to tell Flip – who was sorely disappointed.

As it ended up, I took a call as an associate pastor for mission and youth in a downtown church. After a couple of years of doing urban ministry in the midst of complicated people in a complicated city with complicated problems, I found myself thinking about Flip – appreciating the fact that for all of his awareness of the world, he was satisfied with the simple promises of God he found in that little church on the edge of town.

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You see – God does not believe, nor want us to believe, that we can save the world.

Saving the world is not our business – it is God's.

What God wants is for us to remember whose we are, and to do our part – whatever part that may be.

Be doers of the word. Not merely hearers.

Be doers of the word.

Do not be discouraged by the complexity of the problems facing this world – trust that God is working God’s purposes out.

I know it may sound naïve, maybe even a little preachy, but there is wisdom in this kind of old-time religion. What if we could remember to do the things that James encourages?

What if, every day, we would listen first, speak later, and be slow to anger?

What if, every day, we would wake up, look in the mirror, and recognize that the person looking back at us was a child of God, a disciple of Jesus Christ, who was called to a different way of life?

What if, every day, we would read our Bibles – and keep in mind that God calls those who trust in him to first look after the weak, the lonely, and the vulnerable?

What if, every day, we would remember that all the good we see – especially the good amidst the bad – is a reflection of the grace and mercy of God?

I suggest to you that if each of us did this, yes, the world would still be complicated – but we would more clearly see evidence of the fact that God is working to make all things new.

Even here. Even now.

Through people like you and me.

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